

Classroom Discussion: 1937 Unemployment Census

Description:

The types of questions asked by enumerators expanded for the 1930 Census after the stock market crash in 1929. The need for additional data to support the many legislative programs of the New Deal was even greater for the 1940 census. Prior to this, the Census Bureau conducted a test survey of unemployment in 1937 (Enumerative Check Census) to measure the scope of unemployment during the Great Depression, as well as to test statistical sampling methods for the larger-scale voluntary census effort already underway for the 1940 census.

Standard:

The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945) Standard 1: The causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society



Activity Instructions for Students

Use the photograph and the background on random sampling techniques to answer the suggested discussion questions.

Historically, the Census Bureau's process for designing surveys, and obtaining information from respondents was very labor intensive and expensive in an era when severe cuts in government spending were both mandatory and necessary. Results were often controversial.

During the 1930 Census, people were asked a single question on their employment status the day before the enumeration. If they weren't working, they filled out additional questions on the ability to work, job search, duration of employment, and reason for unemployment. The results seemed low to politicians at the time. Legislators and decision makers during the Great Depression of the 1930s needed more data delivered on a more frequent timeline to understand the depth of the crisis. The broad sweeping changes of the New Deal required resources and data to support it.

To more accurately determine the rate of unemployment, the research staff of the Works Progress Administration (WPA, later known as the Work Projects Administration) began developing techniques for measuring unemployment.

In 1937, two "unemployment censuses" were taken – a voluntary, self-selected census and a sample census (the Enumerative Check Census). The Enumerative Check Census was the first attempt to estimate unemployment on a nationwide basis using probability sampling.

The voluntary census form was delivered to every residential address in the U.S. while the Enumerative Check Census was delivered to 290 of the nonbusiness postal routes. This was the first scientifically constructed national sample conducted by the Census Bureau, and the first reports to include confidence intervals. The results of the two "unemployment censuses" found that the rate of unemployment reported voluntarily was underreported. The sample census (the Enumerative Check Census) found a rate of unemployment, which was more accurate.

The Census Bureau implemented statistical sampling in a decennial census for the first time in 1940. Sampling made it possible to ask additional detailed questions of the population without unduly increasing cost or respondent burden. Enumerators asked a random sample of the population (approximately 5 percent) a set of extra questions. The Census Bureau then used the sample to extrapolate demographic data for the entire United States.

Sampling became a fixture of the decennial censuses, with a certain percentage of the population being required to fill out longer questionnaires with more detailed questions, through the end of the twentieth century. In fact, because the American Community Survey is now the instrument used to gather long form information, the 2010 census was the first since 1930 in which no additional questions were asked of a sample of the population.

Activity Assessment

Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. What were some of the advantages and disadvantages of collecting data on unemployment in 1937, between decennial census of 1930 and 1940?
2. What kinds of programs were initiated during the interim period (between 1930 and 1940) that would have benefitted from statistics on unemployment?
3. During the period immediately following the Great Depression, why might people have been reluctant to provide information on their employment status in a census questionnaire conducted in person by an enumerator?
4. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of using a random sample of the population for an additional set of questions that are not on the standard census form?

5. What sorts of questions (other than employment), were most useful for legislators to include on the long form of the census survey to give them a better idea of the impact and duration of the Great Depression on the American Family?

6. What kinds of questions do you think are important for the yearly American Community Survey (since 2005) to ask in order to track some of today's significant trends?

Teacher's Notes

Learning Objectives

- Students will be able to explore the 'hands-on' approach to survey methodology in 1937 in the photo of the 1937 unemployment survey.
- Students will be able to explain how random sampling and statistical methodologies applied to the 1937 unemployment survey and the 1940 long form questionnaire.
- Students will be able to explain the value of data collected during interim periods (between decennial years) for legislators and decision makers, using the Great Depression and New Deal programs as their prime examples.

Instructions for Teachers

The following is a suggested use of the "Photo of employees and supervisors processing the 1937 unemployment census" and "Background on the Use of Estimates and Sampling Between Decennials".

Before this Activity

Students should have a working knowledge of the impacts of the Great Depression and the social reforms and economic programs of the New Deal. They should also make the connection between government statistics and government programs. Legislators and decision makers during the Great Depression of the 1930s needed more data delivered on a more frequent timeline to understand the depth of the crisis. The broad sweeping changes of the New Deal required resources and data to support it. Teachers should guide students through this discussion with an understanding of the importance and necessity of data obtained by the Census Bureau during the decennial census and interim years.

During this Activity

Have students respond to the prompts in the "Activity Assessment" section. This can be done as a whole class, in small groups, or in written individual format.

After this Activity

Review students' responses to the "Activity Assessment" prompts, addressing any misconceptions or mistakes as you review.

Review the major themes of the activity, incorporating feedback, examples, and data from students as you review.